

An Examination of Selected Predictive Variables and First- to Second-Year Persistence at a Public Liberal Arts University

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Abstract

In challenging economic times, the retention of students becomes even more important for both the financial stability and reputation of an institution. This study examines the applicability of using selected preenrollment variables to predict first- to second-year persistence at Southern Oregon University. The findings of this study suggest the importance of conducting institution-specific analyses regarding attrition and retention, rather than making broad generalizations that may not be applicable.

The retention of college students is a complex issue, representing interplay of personal, institutional, and societal factors, with likely associated detrimental costs and implications to all three audiences (Brunsden, Davies, Shelvin, & Bracken, 2000). From the student perspective, involuntary withdrawal because of academic failure, or inability to cope with the demands of the educational system, lowers self-confidence and self-esteem and represents a likely economic impact. For example, the median U.S. weekly salary in 2003 for a person with some college but no degree was \$622 and the associated average unemployment rate was 5.2%. That was compared to an average weekly salary of \$900 and an associated average unemployment rate of 3.3% for a person with a bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003). Further, a student who begins but does not earn the desired postsecondary credential is unlikely to recoup a significant benefit from the fiscal investment. Bean (1990) further discussed this financial reality:

For individuals, departure from college before graduating can represent a personal failure to achieve educational objectives, an income about 15 percent below that of contemporaries who graduate from college, and the opportunity cost of an investment that will yield little financial benefit. (p. 170)

At the institutional level, retention is a crucial economic and political issue. “For institutions, attrition represents a direct loss of tuition income and, other things being equal, a failure to accomplish their educational mission” (Bean, 1990, p. 170). In the current higher education fiscal environment, most institutions cannot afford to lose students, and their associated tuition revenues, due to attrition. Whether institutional revenue is derived directly from tuition revenue or indirect state governmental support, retention is a key element in fiscal solvency for many campuses. “Each student that leaves before degree completion costs the college or university thousands of dollars in unrealized tuition, fees, and alumni contributions” (DeBerard & Spelmans, 2004, p. 66). Attrition also potentially damages the reputation of an institution, creating long-term implications for attracting new students (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998). In addition to financial considerations, external entities (regulatory, legislative, advocacy) often scrutinize persistence rates and use this information to extol or criticize an institution. “The loss of students returning to campus for another year usually results in greater financial loss and a lower graduation rate for the institution, and might also affect the way that stakeholders, legislators, parents, and students view the institution” (Lau, 2003, p. 127).

Attrition from college also affects society in general. Higher education has long been viewed as a means for both economic and social mobility. In a global society, the ramifications of lower college retention have significant consequences for all countries, including the United States. The primary focus of this study is on the institutional perspective of attrition. As outlined above, retention has become even more important to both the financial well-being of an institution and its reputation among public constituencies. The central research question that guided this study was: Are there predictive variables for student persistence

between the first and second years at Southern Oregon University?

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Literature Review

Demographics

Gender has not been a reliable predictor of student retention. Anderson (1988) utilized a subset of the National